DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 110 407 SO 008 556

AUTHOR Schonfeld, William R.
TITLE The Importance of Politics: A Study of French Secondary School Students. Draft.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 42p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (San Francisco, California, September 2-5, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Activism; Family Background; Political Affiliation; *Political Attitudes; Political Influences; *Political Science; *Political Socialization; Religious Factors; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Social Science Research; *Socioeconomic Influences; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *France

ABSTRACT

The relative importance of government as measured in a sample of French secondary students is examined. Drawn from four different schools, 481 Parisian pupils served as the sample for the study. The students responded to a questionnaire ranking the importance of their relationships with the government and the police with seven other specific relationships including parents, brothers and sisters, friends, the opposite sex, teachers, merchants, and neighbors. The results indicated that relationships with the government and police are among the least important. For the small group that did consider politics important, there are similar background characteristics. Politics are more important for older students, boys, atheists, those who do not practice their religion, and pupils whose fathers have upper class occupations. Atheists, Protestants, and Jews are more likely than Catholics to be highly politicized. (Author/DE)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICS: A STUDY OF FRENCH SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS*

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*The data upon which this paper is based were gathered while I was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (Paris). I would like to thank the Fulbright Commission for financial support, and Serge Moscovici, Director of the Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale, for providing me with working space and the facilities to prepare and reproduce the questionnaire.

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Prepared for delivery at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco Hilton Hotel, San Francisco, California, September 2-5, 1975.

Political scientists know that the decisions of public officials have an enormous impact on people's lives. But how much "importance" do ordinary citizens attribute to government? Numerous scholars who have studied those polities which are typically labelled "democratic," contend that politics is unimportant for most people. According to Robert Dahl:

> ...in New Haven as in the United States generally one of the central facts of political life is that politics--local, state, national, international--lies for most people at the outer periphery of attention, interest, concern, and activity.[1]

Similarly, Butler and Stokes suggest that for the ordinary British subject, politics is very "remote."[2] The French, according to Alain Lancelot, have very little "interest" in politics.[3] And, Ralf Dahrendorf analyzes the ordinary German who is "unpolitical because the political is deeply unimportant for him."[4]

Dahl has carried this idea further than anyone else. Politics, he suggests, acquires importance whenever it "becomes attached to the primary activities"--"activities involving food, sex, love, family, work, play, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem and the like."[5] "This happens rarely, if at all," for "men may be frustrated in their primary activities without ever turning to politics for solutions."

> Since the primary activities are voracious in their demands for time, political activity must enter into competition with them. For most people, it is a weak competitor.[6]

This does not mean that people will not discuss or be "interested" in politics. Quite to the contrary, to be interested in politics "can be a kind of escape from politics;" it "allows one to indulge in a great variety of emotional responses." It is comparable to "the passionate curiosity of a housewife anxiously awaiting the next installment of her favorite soap opera."[7]

If this description is accurate, what is the meaning of the responses provided by ordinary individuals to survey items designed to capture "political attitudes?" Philip Converse argues that such responses may, in fact, be "non-attitudes"[8]--random answers offered for the "benefit" of the researcher and not reflectors of either an inner state of mind or a predisposition to act in a particular fashion. This occurs because government is an object of low centrality for most people, and unless the attitude objects being studied are 'close to home'--such as 'mother,' 'my work,' or 'my professor'--surveys are likely to tap non-attitudes.[9]

Converse's contention is extremely provocative. Most critics focus on the finding that a large proportion of Americans do not apparently have real political attitudes.[10] Among these, some, for example Pierce and Rose, regard Converse's argument as typifying the imputed status-quo bias of empirical theorists of "elitist democracy."[11] In point of fact, I do not understand why radicals could not find as much ideological comfort as conservatives in the rendition of the non-attitudes thesis attributed to Converse.[12] Discovering that ordinary citizens do not have well-formulated political opinions can just as easily be grounds for a potent condemnation of the existing, manipulative government which has desensitized the citizenry to the importance of political matters, as an empirical basis for justifying the limited control ordinary people have over the decisions made by democratic political elites. In any case, I am not particularly interested in Mr. Converse's imputed or real ideological biases.

Converse's article, however, does illuminate one fascinating facet of his intellectual personality: an unusual courage. Philip Converse, along with his colleagues and frequent co-authors at the University of Michigan,

are the leading survey researchers in political science. The non-attitudes thesis suggests that they may have been wasting their time, for if most people do not have political attitudes, any attempt to measure such attitudes is a sterile enterprise.[13]

Oddly enough, Converse, as well as the other political scientists who suggest that politics is not important or central to most people, continue to measure and study ordinary citizens' "political (non?) attitudes." Many factors would have to be considered to explain this paradoxical state of affairs. Perhaps the most crucial factor is that we really do not know how important government, in comparison with other attitude objects, is for any given sample of respondents. Consequently, the arguments for non-centrality are speculative. Appropriate data can only be gathered by using empirical indicators of the relative importance and centrality of distinct attitude domains[14]--including government.[15] In spite of the psychologists' interest in "meaning," to my knowledge, virtually no effort has been directed toward developing this type of measure.

This paper analyzes data on the relative centrality of government for a sample of French secondary school students. After describing the sample and the instruments used to tap centrality, I will present the general findings. These indicate that government and politics are domains of relatively low centrality. Next, the relationship between centrality and more usual indicators of politization will be examined. The purpose of this section is to investigate the role centrality might play in increasing our understanding of political behavior. Finally, I will speculate on the meaning and implications of these findings for the conduct of political inquiry.

THE SAMPLE

The sample contains 481 Parisian secondary school pupils, drawn from four different schools--two lycées (the elite institutions of secondary education) and two C.E.G.-C.E.S.s (similar to the British comprehensive schools). Respondents were in approximately the equivalent of American seventh, ninth, tenth and twelfth grades. Research began in April and was concluded at the end of May 1974.[16]

From the perspective of the relative centrality of government, two characteristics of the sample have crucial importance. First, French high school students, particularly those in Paris, are reputedly extremely politicized. Second, research began just after the death of Georges Pompidou and was carried out during an exciting and extremely significant electoral campaign which was to determine who would be the next President of the Republic. Consequently, the importance attributed to government and politics by the sampled population is not "representative:" compared to samples drawn from other democratic polities, drawn from the general French population, or taken during "normal" times, responses may be expected to be strongly skewed in the direction of attributing greater relative centrality to government. Therefore, if the Popperian perspective on science is correct, we have a good test of the non-importance-of-government thesis.

THE INSTRUMENTS

Respondents filled out a questionnaire. The first item was an open-ended attempt to tap relative centrality:[17]

> There are things, relationships, and activities which mean a great deal to each of us, about which we often think and which we consider important. For you, what are these things, relationships and activities?

The basic coding scheme indicated the total number of items cited by the respondent and the number of these items which referred to the family, the peer group, sex (and relations with members of the opposite sex), the school, individual recreational activities, collective recreational activities, politics, and societal issues.[18] These eight categories, developed after a careful reading of the actual responses, capture all attitude domains mentioned by more than a handful of respondents.

The questionnaire also contained a close-ended attempt to tap relative centrality. The item was introduced as follows:

> You are a member of a family and of a school. You have friends and you know many people. Perhaps you belong to one or many groups or organizations (social, sporting, cultural, religious, political, etc.). And, you are part of a country.
>
> 1. Below is a list of possible relationships, a list to which you can add items. (If you do not have brothers or sisters, ignore the second specified relationship.)
>
> 2. These relationships do not have an equal importance for you. Indicate in the first column, for each of these relationships, the importance that you attribute to it—fundamental importance, a great deal of importance, a little importance, or no importance.
>
> 3. You are not interested in each of these relationships with the same intensity. In the second column, indicate for each of these relationships if you think about it almost all the time, very often, from time to time, rarely or never.

Nine specific relationships were pre-defined:

"relations with your parents"
"relations with your brothers or sisters"
"relations with your friends"
"relations with girls if you are a boy, or with boys if you are a girl"
"relations with teachers"
"relations with merchants (shopkeepers)"
"relations with your neighbors"
"relations with the police"
"relations with the government as a citizen"

In addition, space was provided for respondents to list two additional relationships and then state the amount of personal importance and thinking they gave to each.[19]

THE RELATIVE CENTRALITY OF GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Turning first to the close-ended question, the two "political" relationships[20]--those with the government and with the police--appear to be relatively non-central. Table I presents the data on the importance respondents attribute to each of the nine pre-defined relationships. Relations with the government and the police are in the sixth and ninth positions, respectively. Furthermore, these two relationships, as well as those with neighbors and shopkeepers, are the only ones to which a significant proportion of the respondents attributed no personal importance. Figure I graphically illustrates the relative importance of the nine relations.[21]

Table II and Figure II present the data for the thinking-about question. The two political relationships remain relatively non-central.

To develop a general measure of centrality, I have added the responses to the two questions. This is not to suggest that centrality equals importance plus thinking about, but rather that both items seek to get at the same phenomenon (centrality) from somewhat different perspectives. This notion is supported by the correlations and gammas between the two questions: they are high enough to suggest tapping a common dimension but not so high as to suggest they are different ways of asking exactly the same question. (See Table III.)

TABLE I

RELATIVE IMPORTANCE

Q.: How much importance do you personally attribute to each of the following relationships?

	Fundamental Importance (1)	A Great Deal Of Importance (2)	A Little Importance (3)	No Importance (4)	MEAN	TOTAL N
PARENTS*	54.6% (260)	39.1% (186)	6.1% (29)	.2% (1)	1.519	476
OPPOSITE SEX*	39.0% (185)	42.8% (203)	14.6% (69)	3.6% (17)	1.827	474
BROTHERS*	30.2% (123)	56.0% (228)	11.5% (47)	2.2% (9)	1.857	407
FRIENDS*	28.4% (135)	56.1% (267)	13.4% (64)	2.1% (10)	1.893	476
TEACHERS*	16.3% (76)	53.3% (249)	26.8% (125)	3.6% (17)	2.178	467
GOVERNMENT*	13.0% (60)	30.7% (142)	31.5% (146)	24.8% (115)	2.683	463
NEIGHBORS*	1.5% (7)	20.3% (95)	54.8% (256)	23.3% (109)	3.000	467
SHOPKEEPERS*	1.3% (6)	11.3% (53)	50.9% (238)	36.5% (171)	3.226	463
POLICE*	5.4% (25)	12.3% (57)	28.2% (131)	54.2% (252)	3.312	465

* The full text for each relationship is presented on page 5.

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FIGURE I

MEANS OF RELATIVE IMPORTANCE QUESTIONS

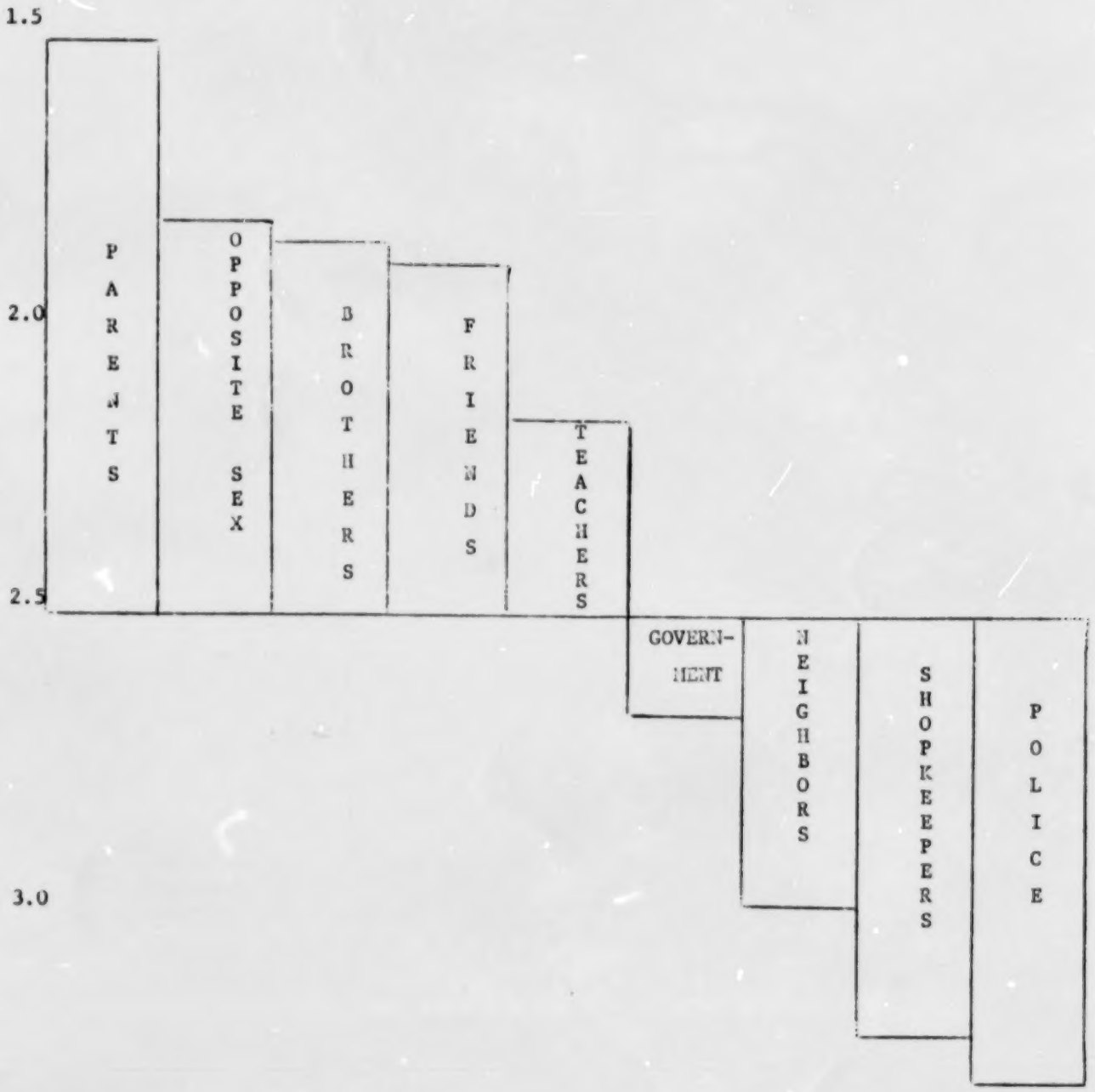

TABLE II

RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF THINKING ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Q.: How often do you think about each of the following relationships?

	Almost All The Time (1)	Very Often (2)	From Time To Time (3)	Rarely (4)	Never (5)	MEAN	TOTAL N
PARENTS*	15.9% (75)	52.5% (248)	27.1% (128)	3.4% (16)	1.1% (5)	2.212	472
OPPOSITE SEX*	24.6% (115)	37.0% (173)	23.3% (109)	10.9% (51)	4.1% (19)	2.328	467
FRIENDS*	15.3% (72)	45.5% (214)	31.5% (148)	6.4% (30)	1.3% (6)	2.328	470
BROTHERS*	12.3% (49)	42.1% (168)	36.3% (145)	8.0% (32)	1.3% (5)	2.439	399
TEACHERS*	5.6% (26)	21.9% (101)	43.8% (202)	23.9% (110)	4.8% (22)	3.002	461
GOVERNMENT*	5.5% (25)	14.6% (66)	24.1% (109)	25.0% (113)	30.8% (139)	3.603	452
NEIGHBORS*	.6% (3)	4.1% (19)	26.7% (124)	37.1% (172)	31.5% (146)	3.946	464
SHOPKEEPERS*	.9% (4)	3.0% (14)	14.2% (66)	41.2% (192)	40.8% (190)	4.180	466
POLICE*	2.8% (13)	3.9% (18)	13.2% (61)	19.3% (89)	60.7% (280)	4.312	461

*The full text for each relationship is presented on page 5.

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FIGURE II

MEANS OF THINKING ABOUT QUESTIONS

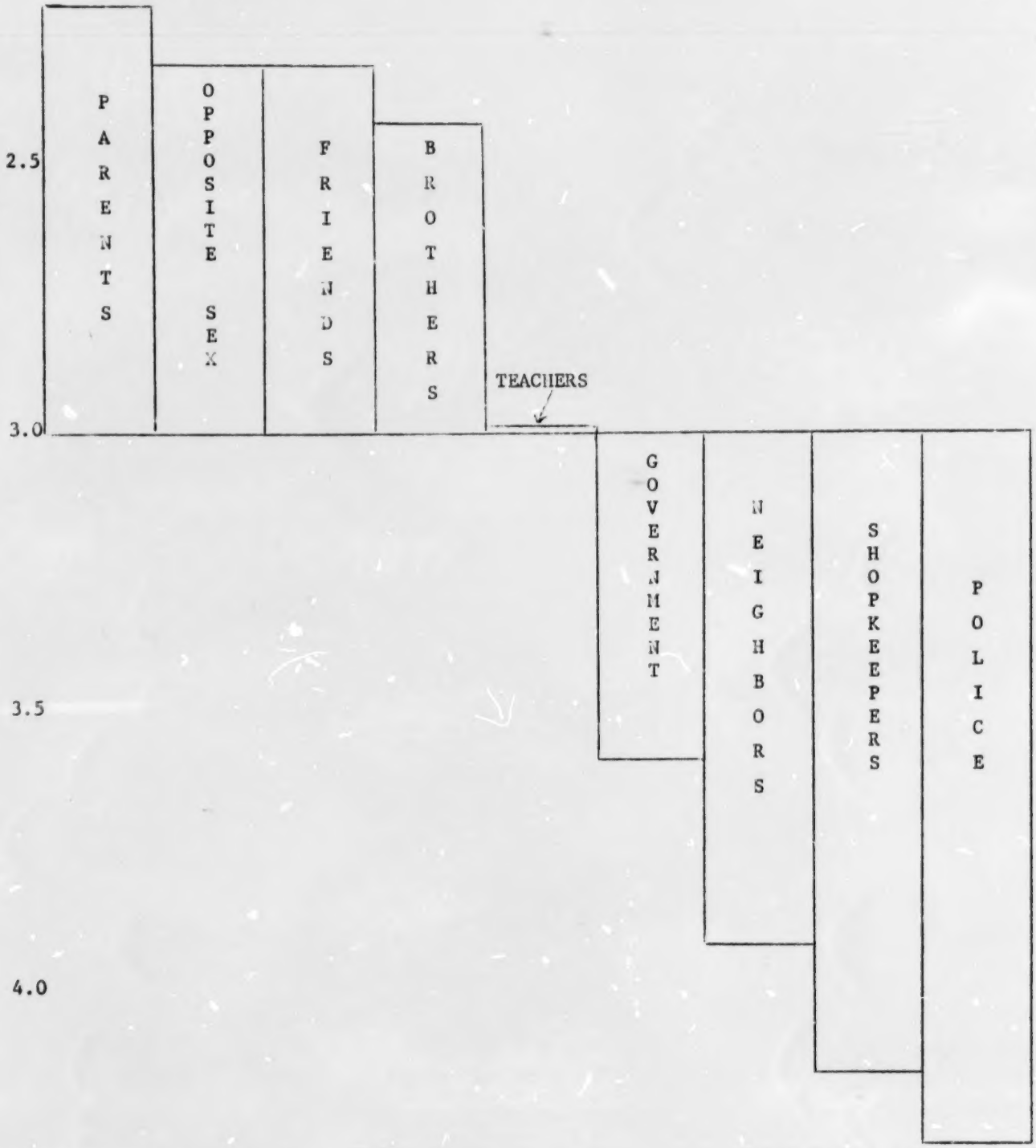

TABLE III

CORRELATIONS AND GAMMAS BETWEEN IMPORTANCE AND THINKING ABOUT QUESTIONS*

	Correlation	Gamma
PARENTS	.40	.55
OPPOSITE SEX	.76	.87
FRIENDS	.67	.85
BROTHERS	.52	.70
TEACHERS	.48	.70
GOVERNMENT	.68	.76
NEIGHBORS	.63	.82
SHOPKEEPERS	.58	.75
POLICE	.56	.77

*Following common disciplinary usage, I have calculated the correlation coefficients. However, since responses to the importance and thinking about questions do not follow a normal distribution, and since it is not obvious to me that the scalar values are genuinely interval (for example, is the distance between "never" and "rarely" equal to the distance between "rarely" and "from time to time?"), I have also calculated the gammas--a statistical measure of association which seems more apt given the data.

For each of the nine pre-defined relationships, centrality scores were grouped into four categories: great centrality (the sum of the responses to the importance and thinking-about questions were 2 or 3), some centrality (4 or 5), little centrality (6 or 7), and no centrality (8 or 9). Table IV gives the percentages in these categories, as well as the overall mean response for each relationship; the means are pictorially represented in Figure III. As might have been expected, the image of relative centrality obtained this way is virtually the same as that based on either the importance or the thinking-about question; relations with the government and with the police remain non-central and in the sixth and ninth positions respectively.

In sum, the responses to the close-ended question indicate: (1) there are four highly central relationships, those with parents, friends, brothers and members of the opposite sex; (2) there is one somewhat central relationship, that with teachers; (3) there is one moderately non-central relationship, that with the government; and (4) there are three very non-central relationships--with the neighbors, police and shopkeepers.

Before analyzing the responses to the open-ended question, let me flesh out the meaning of the eight basic coding categories. The most frequently mentioned items combined under the general rubric of <u>family</u> are: "the family," "family relationships," and "parents." "My friends," "buddies," "comrades," "relations with boys and girls," and "friendship" are the most often cited items in the <u>peer group</u> category. The rubric <u>sex</u> typically captures such references as "love," "relations between boys and girls," and

TABLE IV

RELATIVE CENTRALITY MEASURED BY THE CLOSE-ENDED QUESTION

	Great Centrality (2 + 3)	Some Centrality (4 + 5)	Little Centrality (6 + 7)	No Centrality (8 + 9)	MEAN
PARENTS	46.1% (217)	47.6% (224)	5.7% (27)	.6% (3)	3.735 (471)
OPPOSITE SEX	39.8% (185)	40.6% (189)	15.1% (70)	4.5% (21)	4.151 (465)
FRIENDS	28.3% (133)	56.6% (266)	12.8% (60)	2.3% (11)	4.219 (470)
BROTHERS	27.3% (109)	57.4% (229)	13.5% (54)	1.8% (7)	4.286 (399)
TEACHERS	12.4% (57)	47.1% (216)	36.2% (166)	4.3% (20)	5.174 (459)
GOVERNMENT	9.5% (43)	23.9% (108)	37.0% (167)	29.6% (134)	6.285 (452)
NEIGHBORS	.9% (4)	16.3% (75)	47.2% (217)	35.6% (164)	6.946 (460)
SHOPKEEPERS	1.1% (5)	8.2% (38)	42.3% (196)	48.4% (224)	7.406 (463)
POLICE	3.5% (16)	8.5% (39)	26.3% (120)	61.7% (282)	7.624 (457)

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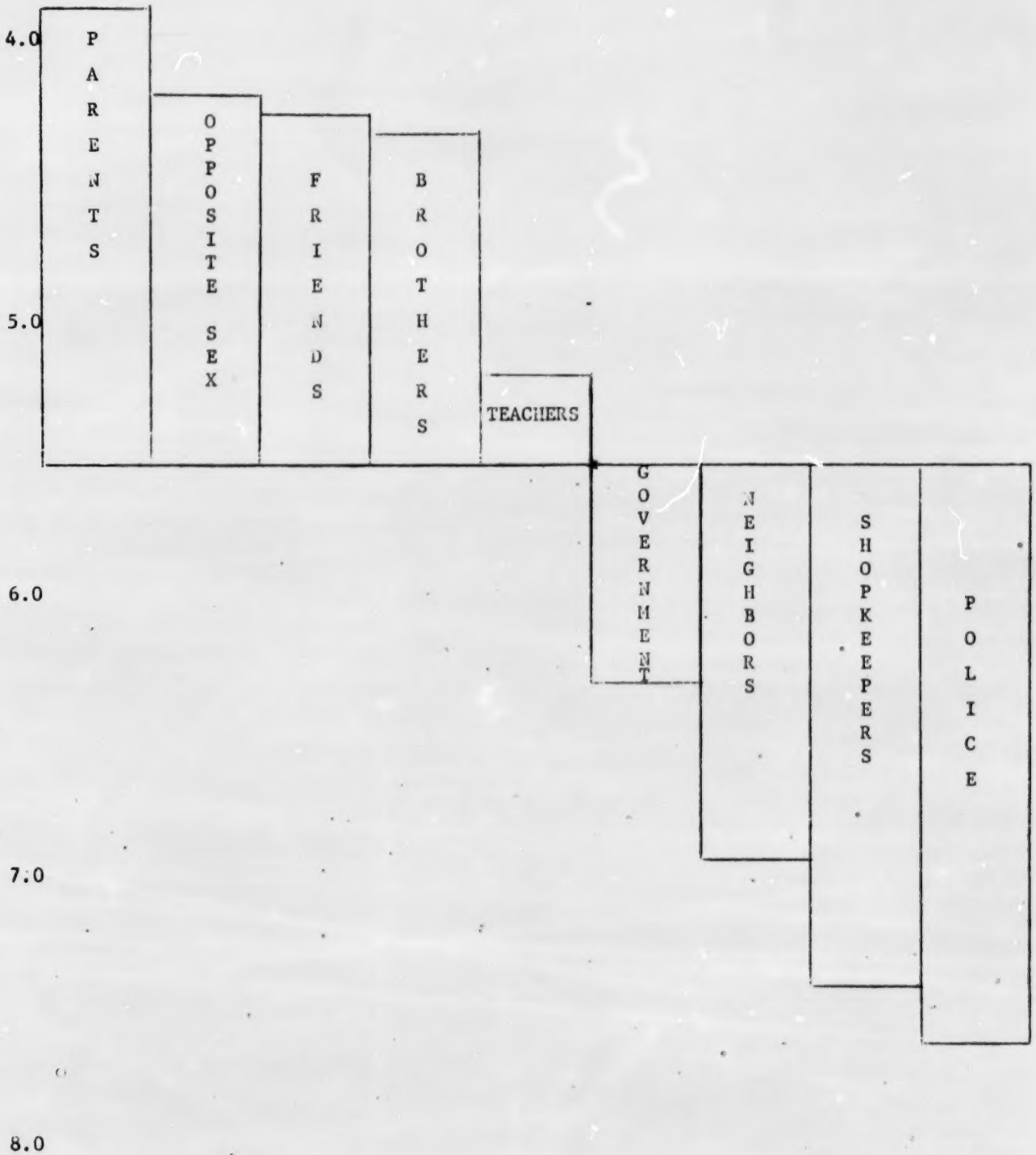
FIGURE III

MEANS OF RELATIVE CENTRALITY:
THE CLOSE-ENDED QUESTION



"relations with girls" (stated by a male). The most commonly cited items categorized as referring to the school are "homework," "school," "the school environment," "my friends in class," "my education," and specific subject matters. Individual recreational activities include, in particular, "listening to music," "films," and a wide range of sports and hobbies which do not require other people--such as boating, golf, painting, photography and hiking. Collective recreational activities basically include sports that cannot be played alone. Items judged as referring to politics include naming a politician (usually Giscard or Mitterrand), "the right to vote," "elections," "political events," "political life," "being an activist," and, most common of all, simply the word "politics." The category societal issues identifies problems or situations which, from the perspective of the scholar, may depend on governmental action. However, the respondent does not present the issue in a manner which suggests an awareness of governmental involvement. The most commonly cited items coded under this rubric are: "ecology," "to be able to express oneself freely," "freedom to do what one wants with one's own life," and "social justice."

Drawing on the answers to the open-ended question, politics seems to be one of the two least central attitude domains. Eighty-two of the 481 high school students (17%) included political items in their list of things, relationships and activities which are of personal importance; only one other category--societal issues--was less frequently cited (16.6% [80]). Table V contains a complete data display, pictorially represented in Figure IV.

While only 17% of the respondents list political items, politics might represent a large proportion of the items which they mention. In contrast,

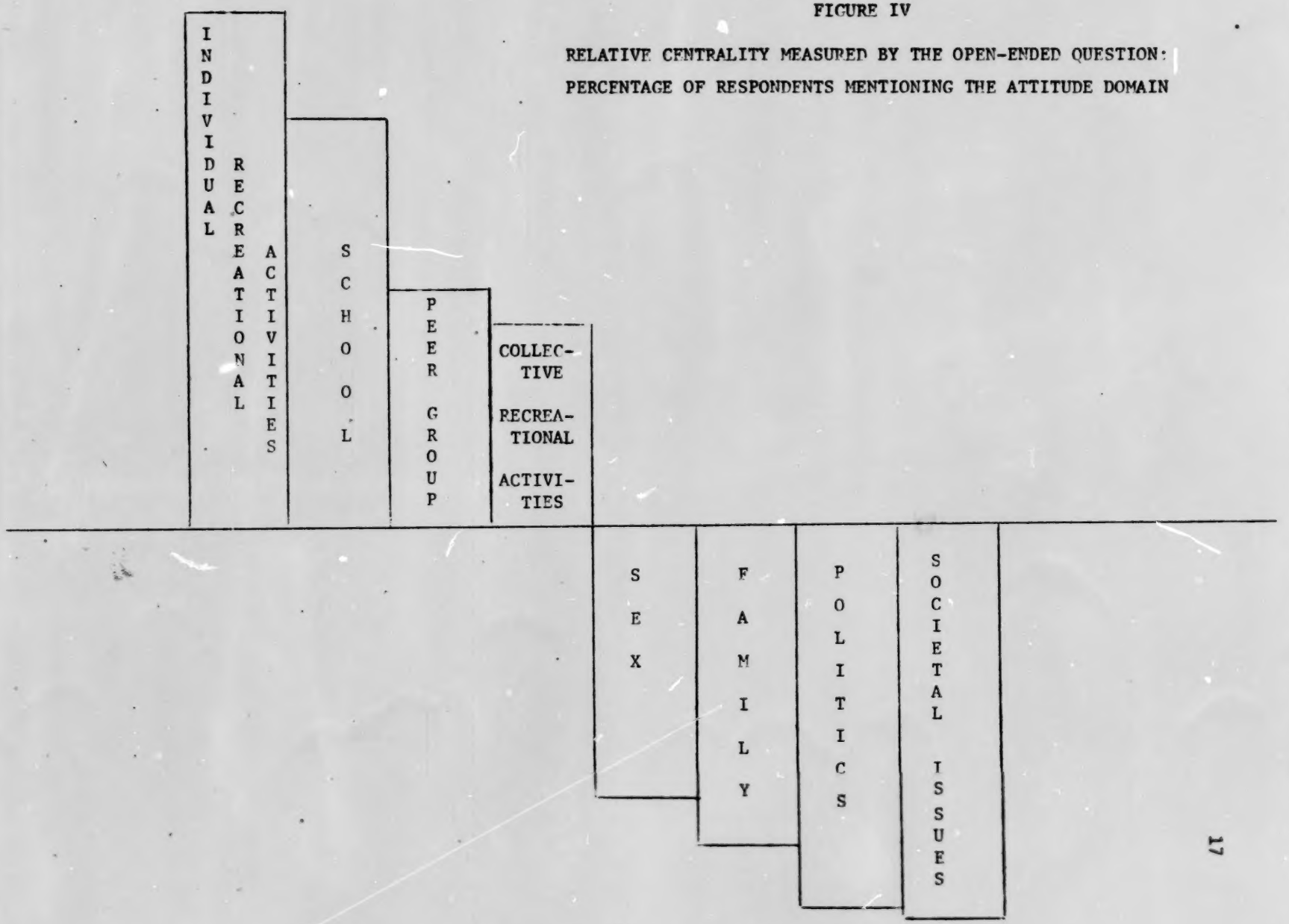
TABLE V

RELATIVE CENTRALITY MEASURED BY THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION:
RESPONDENTS MENTIONING THE ATTITUDE DOMAIN

Individual Recreational Activities	52.4% (252)
School	48.2% (232)
Peer Group	41.4% (199)
Collective Recreational Activities	40.1% (193)
Sex	21.4% (103)
Family	19.5% (94)
Politics	17.0% (82)
Societal Issues	16.6% (80)
	Total N = 481

FIGURE IV

RELATIVE CENTRALITY MEASURED BY THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS MENTIONING THE ATTITUDE DOMAIN



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categories cited by many respondents might each account for a small proportion of the total number of items mentioned. If this were so, politics would be very salient for perhaps as much as one-sixth of the sample, while other categories would have some salience for many people but great salience for few. Such an outcome would cast a special light on the general finding than politics seems to have relatively little importance for most people. To test this hypothesis, we need to know what percentage of the students who cite a particular attitude domain attribute high centrality to it. I have operationalized high centrality as 25% or more of all the items mentioned by the individual fall into the category being considered. The data--presented in Table VI and graphed in Figure V--do not support the idea that those who refer to politics attribute especially high salience to it. Quite to the contrary, only 15.8% (13 out of 82) do. This means that only 2.7% of the total sample regard politics as being highly central. No other category has such a low salience rating.

To further test the salience hypothesis, certain of the basic coding categories might be merged. Among those who identify political items, the references to politics and societal issues could be totaled to determine what proportion attribute high centrality to this combined category. After all, this rather that a somewhat exclusive mention of explicitly governmental phenomena is what we would expect from the "politicized." Second, recreational activities--whether these be undertaken alone or in group--constitute a rather homogeneous set of attitude domains. Finally, since sex most usually occurs with members of one's peer group, these two categories might be combined. Using this revised coding scheme, politics and societal

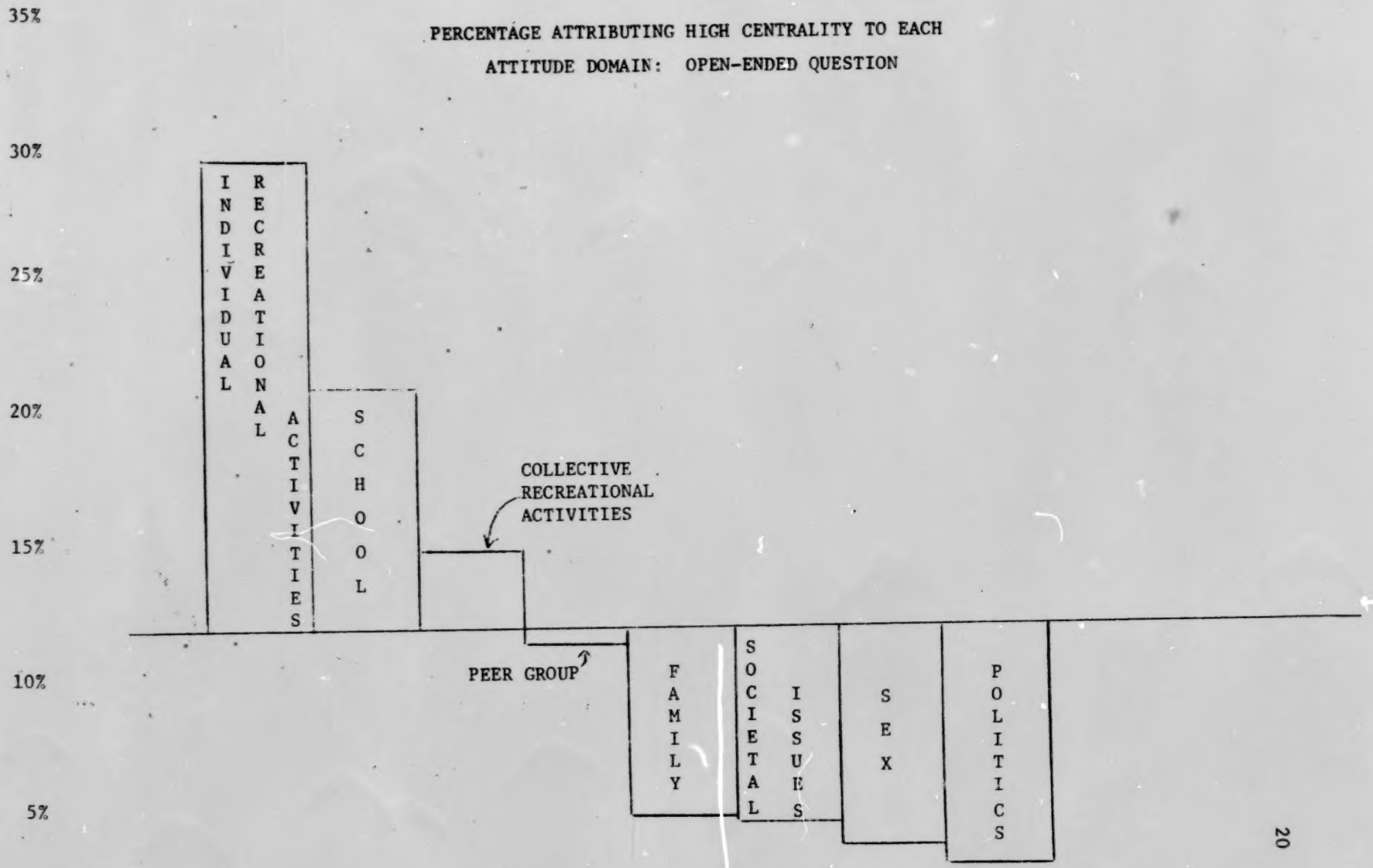
TABLE VI

RELATIVE SALIENCE MEASURED BY THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

	Among the Respondents Mentioning the Attitude Domain, Those Attributing High Centrality to It	Of Total Sample, Percentage Attributing High Centrality to the Particular Attitude Domain
Individual Recreational Activities	56.3% (142 out of 252)	29.5%
School	43.1% (100 out of 232)	20.8%
Collective Recreational Activities	36.3% (70 out of 193)	14.6%
Peer Group	27.1% (54 out of 199)	11.2%
Societal Issues	26.3% (21 out of 80)	4.4%
Family	23.4% (22 out of 94)	4.6%
Sex	16.5% (17 out of 103)	3.5%
Politics	15.8% (13 out of 82)	2.7%

FIGURE V

PERCENTAGE ATTRIBUTING HIGH CENTRALITY TO EACH ATTITUDE DOMAIN: OPEN-ENDED QUESTION



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issues is no longer the least salient domain. 53.7% (44 out of 82) of those who attribute some centrality to politics consider it (broadened to include societal issues) very central; this represents 9.1% of the total sample. (Table VII presents the full data display.)

In sum, on the basis of the responses to the open-ended question, politics--whether narrowly or broadly construed--appears to be a relatively non-central attitude domain having high salience for less than 10% of the sample. The responses to the close-ended question also suggest that political relationships are relatively non-central (less than 10% of the sample attribute great centrality to relations with the government and only 3.5% attribute great centrality to relations with the police). Consequently, we should, in principle, be confident in this finding. However, there are grounds for skepticism. In particular, the results elicted by the close-ended question indicate that the domains of the family (relations with parents and with brothers/sisters) and relations with members of the opposite sex are extremely central for the French secondary school students in the sample. But, the findings drawn from the open-ended question indicate that these domains have little centrality.

What is the meaning of these conflicting results? I believe there is a simple explanation. All of our accepted traditional wisdom suggests that the French attribute highest value to private matters which they do not readily discuss in public or semi-public forums. Given this cultural value, we might suppose that when asked to write about the things, relationships and activities which are subjectively important, the student hesitates, consciously or unconsciously, to identify domains which are particularly private and particularly important, so as to avoid disclosing his inner-self.

TABLE VII

A REVISED MEASURE OF RELATIVE SALIENCE BASED ON THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

	Among Respondents Mentioning the Attitude Domain, Those Attributing High Centrality to It	Of the Total Sample, Those Attributing High Centrality to the Particular Attitude Domain
Recreational Activities	84.1% (212 out of 252)	44.1%
Peer Group (Including Relations with the Opposite Sex)	58.8% (117 out of 199)	24.3%
Politics and Societal Issues	54.7% (44 out of 82)	9.1%
School	43.1% (100 out of 232)	20.8%
Family	23.4% (22 out of 94)	4.6%

This supposition is supported, for example, by the impersonal way in which respondents tended to refer to family items: they wrote "the" family, family relationships and parents rather than my family, family relationships and parents.

The close-ended question did not permit overlooking private attitude domains, because these were included in the pre-defined relationships. At the same time, the respondent could identify the personal importance of and the frequency with which he thought about these domains, without revealing the content of his sentiments or acts.

Consequently, the family and relations with members of the opposite sex may be considered very central attitude domains. The contrary findings of the open-ended question seem to reflect the private nature of these domains, rather than being either an empirical challenge to the established view of the importance of the French family or an indication that the open-ended question has little validity.

DOES POLITICAL CENTRALITY MATTER?

Politics and government seem to be domains of relatively little centrality. This general finding, of course, is not equally valid for all of the surveyed students. Rather, the sample can be divided into three basic sub-sets. First, there are 79 respondents (16.4%) for whom relations with the government have great centrality (measured by the close-ended question) and/or politics--broadened to include societal issues--is very salient (based on their responses to the open-ended item). A second sub-set, containing 23.3% of the sample (112), score higher than the average on the relative centrality items--either identifying some political item on the open-ended question and/or attributing "some centrality" to government on the close-ended question. Finally, 290 respondents (60.3%) make no mention of politics on the open-ended question and attribute "little" or "no" centrality to relations with the government.

If political centrality is an important variable, it should be associated with typical indicators of politicization. First, I would expect political involvement to vary with the degree of centrality. Second, there might be distinct partisan predispositions among the three sub-sets of respondents. In particular, those who attribute no centrality to politics should have vaguer partisan preferences than their peers. Finally, if centrality is related to involvement and partisanship for the sample as a whole, does this relationship also exist within the major sub-groups into which the surveyed population can be divided?

1. Political Involvement

The questionnaire included three typical indicators of involvement. The first, and least demanding, asked if the student would have voted in the presidential elections had he been of legal age. Since 93% of the sample said they would, it is not surprising that the centrality attributed to government and politics is not significantly related to the predisposition to cast a ballot. (See Table VIII, Part A.) The second, and a more demanding, measure of involvement distinguished between respondents who claimed to have a partisan preference and those who did not. Here, the association with centrality is very strong: for example, 92.2% of those who regard politics or government as highly central, compared with 67.3% of those who attribute no centrality to these attitude domains, claim to have a preference. (See Table VIII, Part B.) The third, and most demanding, indicator of involvement separated members from non-members of political groups and organizations. Again, there is a very strong relationship to centrality: 27.8% of those who regard politics or government as highly central, but only 10.8% of those who attribute no centrality to these domains, are members. (See Table VIII, Part C.)

TABLE VIII

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND CENTRALITY

		HIGH POLITICAL CENTRALITY	ABOVE AVERAGE POLITICAL CENTRALITY	NO POLITICAL CENTRALITY	TOTAL	DEGREE OF ASSOCIATION
A. PREDISPOSITION TO VOTE[1]	YES	93.6% (73)	95.4% (103)	92.0% (252)	93% (428)	Kendall's Tau C = .02272 p = .23
	NO	6.4% (5)	4.6% (5)	8.0% (22)	7% (32)	Gamma = .17
		(78)	(108)	(274)	(460)	
B. THE EXISTENCE OF A POLITICAL PREFERENCE[2]	YES	92.2% (71)	82.4% (89)	67.3% (181)	75.1% (341)	Kendall's Tau C = .20125 p = .00000
	NO	7.8% (6)	17.6% (19)	32.7% (88)	24.9% (113)	Gamma = .51
		(77)	(108)	(269)	(454)	
C. MEMBERSHIP IN A POLITICAL GROUP[3]	MEMBER	27.8% (20)	14.0% (14)	4.8% (12)	10.8% (46)	Kendall's Tau C = .16679 p = .00000
	NON-MEMBER	72.2% (52)	86.0% (86)	95.2% (240)	89.2% (378)	Gamma = .61
		(72)	(100)	(252)	(424)	

1. The question was: If you were old enough, would you vote (would you have voted) in the May 1974 presidential elections?
2. The question was: Do you have a political preference?
3. The question was: Are you a member of a political group or organization? If so, which one(s)? Since only 46 of the surveyed students claimed to be members, the relationship between centrality and type of organization cannot be analyzed seriously. However, let me note that 34 of the 46 members (74%) belong to leftist (basically extreme-left) organizations.

2. Partisan Preference

The questionnaire contained two open-ended indicators of partisanship. The students were asked to specify their political preference (if they claimed to have one) and to identify their preferred presidential candidate (if they indicated a predisposition to vote).

The relationship between centrality and political preference is displayed in Table IX. The data does not indicate--as it did with the measures of involvement--a linear relationship. Rather each of the three sub-sets of respondents seems to exhibit a different style of partisanship. First, the students with a high political centrality score have a strong affinity for well-defined left-opposition forces: 58.1% sympathize with communism, socialism and extreme left ideologies, such as anarchism and maoism; but only 35.6% in the above-average-centrality group and 30.1% of those attributing no centrality to politics have such sympathies. Second, respondents with no political centrality disproportionately identify the vaguest and most general political tendencies: 61.4% of them--in contrast to 35.2% of those with high political centrality scores and 48% of those with above-average political centrality--sympathized with the "left," "center," or "right."[22] Finally, students whose centrality scores are above average not only are much more likely than those with high centrality to sympathize with vague political tendencies--as we have just seen--but also are more strongly inclined than their peers toward the well-defined political forces which have governed France in recent years: 16.5% sympathize with the Gaullists and the Republican Independents, compared to 6.4% of the students who attribute great centrality to politics and 8.5% of those who attribute no centrality to politics.

TABLE IX

CONTENT OF POLITICAL PREFERENCE AND CENTRALITY

Q.: What is your political preference?*

	HIGH POLITICAL CENTRALITY	ABOVE AVERAGE POLITICAL CENTRALITY	NO POLITICAL CENTRALITY	TOTAL
Extreme Left	12.9% (8)	6.8% (5)	3.9% (6)	6.6% (19)
Communist	12.9% (8)	6.8% (5)	7.2% (11)	8.3% (24)
Socialist	32.3% (20)	21.9% (16)	19.0% (29)	22.6% (65)
Left	24.2% (15)	26.0% (19)	35.9% (55)	30.9% (89)
Center	3.2% (2)	9.6% (7)	6.5% (10)	6.6% (19)
Gaullist	4.8% (3)	5.5% (4)	2.6% (4)	3.8% (11)
Republican Independent	1.6% (1)	11.0% (8)	5.9% (9)	6.2% (18)
Right	8.1% (5)	12.3% (9)	19.0% (29)	14.9% (43)
	(62)	(73)	(153)	(288)

Kendall's Tau C = .17184

p = .00001

Gamma = .23

*Respondents composed their own answer to this question. I grouped these responses into the eight categories presented in this table. The actual answers forming each category are as follows:

Extreme Left: Revolutionary (N = 7), Anarchist (6), Extreme Left (5), and Maoist (1).
Communist: the Communist Party (15), Communism or Communist (9)
Socialist: Socialism or Socialist (58), the Socialist Party (7)
Left: Left (83), Radical Socialist (58), Dumont (2)
Center: Center (11), left center (3), right center (3), centrist réformateur (2)
Gaullist: Gaullist (7), UDR (4)
Republican Independents: Republican Independents (16), Giscard (2)
Right: Right (34), Capitalism (5), Anti-Communist (3), Monarchist (1)

00029

I would like to speculate briefly on the logic behind these findings. There is every reason to expect that the more highly politicized someone is, the more likely he is to adopt a well-defined political preference. If the indicators of centrality are tapping psychological politicization, then as centrality increases so should the precision of one's partisanship. This is exactly what I found: 64.8% of those with high political centrality, 52% of those with above average political centrality, and 38.6% of those with no political centrality, expressed a precise partisan preference.

In addition to distinct tendencies to define preferences more or less narrowly, respondents vary in terms of the direction of their partisanship. In particular, those attributing high centrality to politics disproportionately identify with leftist political forces. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, Robert Dahl speculated that politics acquires importance for people when it becomes attached to the primary activities, and this happens rarely. However, I would imagine that when such a linkage does occur, it is more often on the basis of profound discontentment, than satisfaction, with everyday life. If my hunch is correct, a turning to politics for solutions, would be a turn toward those political forces supportive of significant changes. And, in France, the Communists, Socialists, and Extreme Left are the most vigorous advocates of a world dramatically different from the existing one. In this context, the pattern of partisanship of the students who attribute high centrality to politics, makes sense.

The second measure of partisanship included in the questionnaire (preferred presidential candidate) does not permit testing the relationship between centrality and precision of political preference (each choice identifies a particular individual and not a more or less well-defined orientation).

However, the data, presented in Table X, does support the notion that respondents with high political centrality are much more inclined to the left than their peers: 80.8% claimed they would have voted for one of the four candidates of the left, as compared to 60.6% of those with above average centrality scores and 63% of those who attribute no centrality to politics.

In sum, just as in the case of political involvement, there does seem to be a clear association between the amount of centrality attributed to government and politics and the individual's partisan orientation.

3. For Whom Does Centrality Matter?

For the sample as a whole, centrality does seem to "matter" (in the sense of being associated with measures of political involvement and partisanship). But does centrality matter for all the major sub-groups into which the surveyed students could be divided? Perhaps there are important, systematic differences between sub-groups; for example, all the indicators of involvement and partisanship might be very tightly related to centrality among boys, and hardly at all related among girls. Such a finding would critically affect any assessment of the role of political centrality. Even if such dramatic, systematic differences do not exist, the association between centrality and involvement, obviously, cannot be the same across sub-groups. And to increase the subtlety of analysis, we should identify the types of people for whom centrality matters most.

Consequently, I re-examined the relationships between political centrality and each indicator of involvement and partisanship, controlling for age, sex, social status, religious denomination and religious practice. Table XI presents the relevant measures of association for each variable and each sub-group. By controlling for the background variable, we discover that for the

TABLE X

PREFERRED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE AND CENTRALITY

Q.: (If you were old enough and would have voted in the May 1974 presidential elections) who would have been your candidate?*

	HIGH POLITICAL CENTRALITY	ABOVE AVERAGE POLITICAL CENTRALITY	NO POLITICAL CENTRALITY	TOTAL
EXTREME LEFT (Krivine and Laguiller)	16.4% (12)	6.1% (5)	4.7% (11)	7.1% (29)
DUMONT	15.1% (11)	13.1% (13)	17.9% (42)	16.2% (66)
MITTERRAND	49.3% (36)	41.4% (41)	40.4% (95)	42.3% (172)
CHABAN	4.1% (3)	1.0% (1)	3.8% (9)	3.2% (13)
GISCARD	12.3% (9)	36.4% (36)	32.3% (76)	29.7% (121)
OTHER (LePen, Royer Mueller)	2.7% (2)	2.0% (2)	0.9% (2)	1.5% (6)
	(93)	(99)	(235)	(407)

chi square** = 26.13426 with 10 degrees of freedom
p = .0036

* Respondents were not provided with a list but rather had to write down the name of their candidate.

** Since I do not think a clear left-right continuum is reflected in the movement from the "extreme left" to "other," the preferred-presidential-candidate variable is nominal, and to determine significance, the chi square test rather than Kendall's Tau is appropriate.

TABLE XI

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CENTRALITY AND THE INDICATORS OF INVOLVEMENT AND PARTISANSHIP, CONTROLLING FOR THE BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

	PREDISPOSITION TO VOTE[1]	EXISTENCE OF A POLITICAL PREFERENCE[1]	MEMBERSHIP IN A POLITICAL GROUP[1]	CONTENT OF POLITICAL PREFERENCE[1]	PREFERRED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE[2]
Sex:					
Male	.26	.60	.60	.15	.28
Female	- .01	.36	.62	.40	.21
Age:					
11 to 15	.10	.47	.57	.19	.20
16 to 20	.22	.52	.63	.22	.22
Social Status:[3]					
Upper Class	.23	.61	.62	.25	.20
Lower Class	- .06	.27	.43	.11	.27
Religious Denomination:					
Catholic	.09	.36	.46	.08	.20
Other Religion[4]	.15	.41	.11	.24	.30
Atheist	.32	1.00	.73	.30	.30
Religious Practice:					
Practicing	.14	.21	.52	.10	.17
Non-Practicing	.18	.73	.64	.28	.19

1. The degree of association is measured by gamma.
2. The degree of association is measured by Cramér's V.
3. Social status is based on the occupation of the respondent's father.
4. "Other religion" includes especially Jews (N = 28) and Protestants (N = 22).

older students, atheists, and those who do not practice their religion, centrality matters more on each and every variable. In addition, there is a closer association between centrality and the indicators of involvement and partisanship for boys (than for girls) and for pupils whose fathers have upper class occupations (than for those whose fathers have lower class occupations).

Among the background variables, religious denomination seems to have the greatest influence on the level of association between centrality and the indicators of involvement and partisanship. In particular, there might be dramatic, systematic differences between Catholics and atheists. To study this possibility, Table XII was prepared. (Since I have treated the indicators of involvement and partisanship dichotomously, the table has been simplified by only identifying the proportion of Catholics and atheists falling into those categories most associated with high political centrality.) First, the data suggest that for both sub-groups the nature of the relationship between centrality and the indicators of involvement and partisanship is the same as it was for the entire sample. Second, for those who attribute no centrality to politics, there are no meaningful differences between Catholics and atheists, except on the political preference item. Last, among respondents who attribute above-average or high centrality to politics, atheists are much more likely than Catholics to be politically involved and to adopt a precise, leftist partisan orientation.

Thus, centrality matters for all the major sub-groups into which I have divided the surveyed population. It seems to matter most of all for atheists, among whom the accelerator effect of centrality is dramatic.

TABLE XII

CENTRALITY AND THE MEASURES OF INVOLVEMENT AND PARTISANSHIP, AMONG CATHOLICS AND ATHEISTS

		HIGH POLITICAL CENTRALITY	ABOVE AVERAGE POLITICAL CENTRALITY	NO POLITICAL CENTRALITY	TOTAL
PREDISPOSED TO VOTE	CATHOLICS	89.7% (26)	95.6% (65)	91.8% (156)	92.5% (247)
	ATHEISTS	93.6% (31)	96.2% (25)	88.9% (56)	91.8% (112)
CLAIMS TO HAVE A POLITICAL PREFERENCE	CATHOLICS	86.2% (25)	79.4% (54)	67.1% (114)	72.3% (193)
	ATHEISTS	100% (33)	100% (26)	65.6% (40	82.5% (99)
MEMBER OF A POLITICAL GROUP	CATHOLICS	11.1% (3)	11.1% (7)	3.7% (6)	6.3% (16)
	ATHEISTS	43.8% (14)	26.1% (6)	5.1% (3)	20.2% (23)
EXTREME LEFT, COMMUNIST, OR SOCIALIST POLITICAL PREFERENCE	CATHOLICS	40.0% (10)	32.6% (14)	26.5% (26)	30.1% (50)
	ATHEISTS	70.4% (19)	43.5% (10)	37.1% (13)	49.4% (42)
PRECISE POLITICAL PREFERENCE	CATHOLICS	56.0% (14)	53.5% (23)	34.7% (34)	42.8% (71)
	ATHEISTS	70.4% (19)	56.5% (13)	42.9% (15)	55.2% (47)
PREFERRED LEFTIST PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE	CATHOLICS	69.2% (18)	49.2% (31)	63.6% (91)	60.3% (140)
	ATHEISTS	90.3% (28)	80.0% (20)	60.3% (32)	73.4% (80)

Before concluding this section, let me briefly indicate the general relationship between centrality and the background characteristics of respondents. (See Table XIII.) Males, the older pupils, and those whose fathers have upper class occupations are somewhat more prone than other students to attribute high or above-average centrality to politics and government. Atheists, Protestants and Jews are more than twice as likely as Catholics to be in the high centrality category; but there seems to be no meaningful general association between practicing one's religion and centrality.

IMPLICATIONS

My research indicates that: (1) at least 80% of the sample regard politics and government as attitude domains of relatively low centrality and importance; (2) for 60% of the respondents, these attitude domains have no centrality whatsoever; and (3) the level of political involvement and the style of partisanship vary with centrality. What is the meaning of these findings? Let me briefly outline the two most obvious implications.

First, it appears that a significant variable has been ignored in political inquiry, a variable which can plausibly and parsimoniously account for distinct levels of political involvement and styles of partisanship. In fact, centrality might be a good indicator of what we intuitively mean by politicization. In essence a politicized citizen is one who links governmental decisions with their ramifications for his family, his work and his everyday life in general. Logically, such an individual must regard politics as central. However, someone who proclaims an interest in and has knowledge

TABLE XIII

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND CENTRALITY

	HIGH POLITICAL CENTRALITY	ABOVE AVERAGE POLITICAL CENTRALITY	NO POLITICAL CENTRALITY	DEGREE OF ASSOCIATION
SEX				
MALE 61.2% (293)	18.1% (53)	24.2% (71)	57.7% (169)	Kendall's Tau C = .06555 p = .01581
FEMALE 38.8% (186)	14.0% (26)	22.0% (41)	64.0% (119)	Gamma = .12
AGE				
11 to 15 51.7% (246)	14.6% (36)	17.9% (44)	67.5% (166)	Kendall's Tau C = -.14229 p = .00000
16 to 20 48.3% (230)	18.3% (42	29.6% (68)	52.2% (120)	Gamma = - .25
SOCIAL STATUS				
UPPER CLASS 66.4% (281)	18.5% (52)	24.6% (69)	56.9% (160)	Kendall's Tau C = .09751 p = .00000
LOWER CLASS 33.6% (142)	12.0% (17)	21.1% (30)	66.9% (95)	Gamma = .20
RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION				
CATHOLIC 59.8% (277)	10.5% (29)	25.3% (70)	64.3% (178)	Chi Square = 18.10124 with 4 degrees of freedom. p = .0012
OTHER RELIGION 13.0% (60)	23.3% (14)	23.3% (14)	53.3% (32)	
ATHEIST 27.2% (126)	26.2% (33)	21.4% (27)	52.4% (66)	
RELIGIOUS PRACTICE				
PRACTICES 35.5% (157)	13.4% (21)	29.9% (47)	56.7% (89)	Kendall's Tau C = .01253 p = .34657
NON PRACTICING 64.5% (285)	18.2% (52)	21.1% (60)	60.7% (173)	Gamma = .02

about his government need not see this linkage. Rather, for him the political "drama" may simply be that, a fascinating theatrical extravaganza taking place on a distant stage.

The amount of centrality attributed to a specific attitude domain may well affect and/or reflect the extent to which one behaves in that domain. Since it appears that politics is not very central for most people, we should expect relatively little political "behavior."[23] Interestingly, students of political participation have taught us to consider someone highly participant, when in fact he does very little: for example, he votes, contacts a public official, donates money to a campaign, and attends a rally, activities which even when taken together need not require more than one hour's time per year. But "participation" in the family, on the job, or in school, are--at least from the time perspective--fundamentally different. Moreover, the time differential might be associated with distinct types of activity. I think this is a reasonable supposition, and one, I have argued elsewhere, which could resolve the debate over the meaning of democratic participation.[24]

A second, and more provocative, implication raises questions about what political scientists have been studying when they analyze the responses ordinary people give to survey items. The construction and timing of the French research were designed to maximize the possibility of discovering that ordinary people consider politics and government important. Yet, less than 20% of the sample attributed relatively high centrality to these domains. If, as Converse has suggested, the importance attributed to an object or situation affects the likelihood for attitudes or non-attitudes to be expressed, then only a small proportion of the French sample, and an even smaller proportion of respondents in other populations, apparently have political attitudes.

Perhaps political questionnaire items tend to elicit non-attitudes, not necessarily in Converse's sense that these responses will randomly shift over time, but rather in a broader sense: they are expressions of relatively superficial views. Such non-attitudes do not place constraints upon an individual's future attitudes; nor do they reflect behavioral commitments, pre-disposing oneself toward a specific course of action which requires time and effort. These non-attitudes may be quite stable over time precisely because they do not indicate a well-entrenched set of preferences and dislikes; consequently, changes in the environment do not necessarily influence what opinions or judgments will be expressed. Although none of my research was directed toward determining if those people who considered politics and government relatively non-central were expressing non-attitudes in Converse's or in the broader sense, this certainly makes sense. It is plausible to assume, until evidence to the contrary is unearthed, that if people do not consider something of importance to themselves, they may well have and express views on this subject, but these views do not tell us very much either about the people or what they will do in fact under any given future conditions, because their views are not constraining.

I do not wish to suggest that political scientists should ignore the results of survey research. Rather research among ordinary citizens should be broadened so that we can determine which respondents consider politics highly central. The characteristics of the politicized and the conditions which lead to political centrality also must be thoroughly investigated. And even the content of non-attitudes has some interest, especially in stable polities. In these societies, such responses represent the habitual, superficial, but nevertheless relatively persistent, views of most people toward their political system.

The implications for the study of political socialization are more serious, given the raison d'être for this field of inquiry.[25] Most children's views of politics and government may tell us more about the superficial opinions of the adults with whom they have had contact than about themselves. And, remembering that relations with the police are the least central of all attitude domains I analyzed, there is good reason to conclude this paper by asking: what are we studying when we examine youngster's dispositions toward the neighborhood cop?

FOOTNOTES

1. Dahl, Who Governs? Democracy and Power in An American City (New Haven and London, 1961), 279.

2. David Butler and Donald Stokes, Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice (New York, 1969), 25.

3. Lancelot, L'Abstentionnisme électoral en France (Paris, 1968), 164-67.

4. Dahrendorf, Society and Democracy in Germany (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), 377.

5. Dahl, Who Governs?, 279.

6. Ibid., 280.

7. Ibid., 178.

8. Converse, "Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue," revised version of a paper read at the Seventeenth International Congress of Psychology in Washington, D.C., August 1963. Reprinted in Edward R. Tufte, ed., The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems (Reading, Mass., 1970), 168-89.

9. Ibid.

10. In particular, see W. Lance Bennett's excellent study, The Political Mind and the Political Environment (Lexington, Mass., 1975), esp. Chp. 1.

11. John C. Pierce and Douglas D. Rose, "Nonattitudes and American Public Opinion: The Examination of a Thesis," American Political Science Review, LXVIII (June 1974), 646 and passim.

12. Converse feels that Pierce and Rose misrepresent his non-attitudes thesis. Philip E. Converse, "Comment: The Status of Nonattitudes," American Political Science Review, LXVIII (June 1974), 650-660.

13. For my views on the consequences of non-centrality for the study of political socialization, see: William R. Schonfeld, "The Focus of Political Socialization Research: An Evaluation," World Politics XXIII (April 1971), esp. 571-77.

14. I am using the term "attitude domains" to denote attitude objects and/or attitude situations.

15. In other words, importance should be understood as a relative concept. Things are not important or unimportant to people; rather they are more or less important than other things.

16. This study of relative centrality was part of a larger inquiry into the nature of behavior toward authority by pupils in secondary schools--in particular, I have been concerned with student-teacher interactions. A study of this phenomenon was conducted in 1967-1968. The 1974 study sought primarily to get at changes which have occurred since the May crisis. Research included not only pupil questionnaires but also classroom observation and teacher interviews. For further details on the structure of French education and the results of the first study, see: William R. Schonfeld, Youth and Authority in France: A Study of Secondary Schools (Beverly Hills, Sage Professional Papers in Comparative Politics, 1971), and especially my forthcoming book, Behavior Toward Authority: Obedience and Revolt in France (Beverly Hills, 1976).

17. This item was placed at the very beginning so that responses to it would not be polluted by the other items included in the questionnaire, which focused attention on student-teacher authority relations.

18. Examples of the specific items included in student tests are given on pages 12 and 15.

19. A minority of the students identified additional relationships. These are sufficiently heterogeneous as to militate against meaningful analysis.

20. I am using political in the narrow sense--i.e., government-related. Personally, I find it more profitable to conceive of politics as the study of authority relations in any social or political unit. (See my works cited in fn. 16.) On this point, consult: Harry Eckstein, "Authority Patterns: A Structural Basis for Political Inquiry," American Political Science Review LXVII (December 1973), 1142-1161.

21. I have constructed this, as well as all other figures, in a somewhat unorthodox fashion. Specifically, the X axis is drawn at the mid-value of the scale (for example, if responses can range from 1 to 4, the axis is drawn at 2.5). Thus, means greater than the mid-value have bars going upwards, and means lower than the mid-values have bars going downward. The result seems to be a clear visual representation of relative importance (or thinking about or centrality).

22. The relationship between centrality and precision of partisan preference remains if respondents who did not identify any political preference are included in the calculations: 49.4% of those with high political centrality, 66.1% of those with above-average centrality, and 79.7% of those with no centrality, fail to identify a precise partisan preference.

23. I have always been struck by that paradoxical label of "behavioral political science," a mode of inquiry which focuses on the study of attitudes.

24. William R. Schonfeld, "The Meaning of Democratic Participation," World Politics, XXVIII (October 1975).

25. For my perspectives on this field of inquiry and a description of a research strategy designed to overcome the drawbacks of analyzing children's political "attitudes," see: Schonfeld, "The Focus of Political Socialization Research: An Evaluation."